

Document Citation

Title	Much ado about nothing
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Source	<i>Soho Weekly News</i>
Date	1978 Dec 14
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	65
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The deer hunter, Cimino, Michael, 1978

Much Ado About Nothing

Diane Jacobs

The Deer Hunter
Coronet (opens Dec. 15)

Rain and Shine
Cinema Studio 2 (opens Dec. 19)

During its first hour, *The Deer Hunter* swells like a wave. It never pauses, never stops to observe a nuance or caprice — it gathers, it waxes; clearly it is bent on showing us something important. Set among a community of Pennsylvania steelworkers, the first third of Michael Cimino's epic-length film compresses all the male rites between birth and death into a late afternoon and evening in the lives of its three heroes. Without wasting more than a descriptive phrase or two on the characters involved — an affectionate "you're a control freak" or a chastising "you always forget your boots when we go hunting" — *The Deer Hunter* shows us man working (at the steel mill), man playing (at pool), man taking a marriage vow with woman, man testing his virility against nature, against death, by hunting down deer. Man is in excruciating close-up, and men are eclipsed.

We, the audience, have the odd sensation that we're so close to the gracefully photographed bodies of the characters that we could touch them; and, at the same time, emotionally so far away that their various quirks, vanities, and (especially) ideas blur into archetype. Indeed, the script seems to have been written by the literary equivalent of the photographer who walks boldly up to his subject and then focuses on the mountains in the background.

The Deer Hunter is a film that says elipsis is profundity. It's a lazy film which argues that a moving image, particularly a relentlessly limpid moving image of something relentlessly ugly, is worth a thousand thoughts. The story is told in three interrelated sections and could not be simpler. Nick (Christopher Walken), Michael (Robert De Niro), and Steven (John Savage) are three friends who leave their hometown of Clairton, Pennsylvania, to join the infantry in Vietnam some time in the late Sixties. Steven is recently married; Nick is good-natured, loves nature, and is engaged to the beautiful Linda (Meryl Streep); Michael is a little "crazy" (what this implies is not clear), is the best hunter, believes a deer must be slain with a single clean shot. Before they leave for Vietnam, this is all we know about the boys and, suggests Cimino, is all we need to know.



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Where the first section of the film involves a series of rites, the second third is one long harrowing ritual of war. From the somber Pennsylvania town, Cimino cuts quickly to the Vietcong equivalent of our My Lai, to a VC soldier machine-gunning a helpless mother and child. And then, just as quickly, the film moves to a swampy area deep in that odd, fulsome Asian world where Vietcong soldiers have set up a kind of Russian roulette torture for their American prisoners, among them Michael, Nick, and Steve. A bullet is placed in the gun's carriage and gleefully spun around. Then each prisoner is forced, one after the other, to put the pistol up to his head and pull the trigger. Thanks largely to Michael's courage and coolheadedness, all three Clairton boys escape, but — understandably — are never the same again. Steve loses his legs,

Nick his mind, Michael his desire to shoot deer.

In the film's final section, Michael comes home, spends some time with Nick's girl friend Linda, then goes back to Saigon to search for Nick who's now gone AWOL and is risking his life nightly in a civilian's game of Russian roulette for profit. Michael finds him, tells him he loves him, tries shock techniques to get him home, and fails. Nick dies in the midst of his cathartic crisis; and after Nick's funeral, while waiting for their dinner, his Pennsylvania friends begin chanting "God Bless America."

Talent is not the problem in *The Deer Hunter*: it's here in abundance — in Vilmos Zsigmond's hypnotic cinematography, in Michael Cimino's sedulous pacing, in the acting. Christopher Walken and Meryl Streep are particularly good as Nick

and Linda, and whenever Streep — who is new to film but clearly not to acting — appears on the screen *The Deer Hunter* becomes less sanctimonious. There's incredible warmth and conviction to her performance, and her scenes with De Niro are wonderful. De Niro himself is not particularly good here. He seems to know only a little more about the very vague character whose life he's meant to assume than we do, and it is natural under such circumstances that he should fall back on his familiar antics — the inarticulate phrasing, the crazed stares, the abrupt movements.

The Deer Hunter is manifestly about virility, about war, about America, maybe (but I'm not sure of this), about American involvement in Vietnam. Granted, it's a difficult, unsettling film to watch, but what does it have to say? All the cruel people happen to be Vietnamese; so is it telling war protesters that the Vietcong were really more nefarious than the Americans? Is it saying we were wrong to get involved in that war because the Vietnamese have weird, warped ideas that our civilized Western brains can't handle?

Maybe it means to say nothing as specific as this, although it is clearly a flaw in the film that we aren't sure. Maybe it is only using Vietnam as a particularly grueling example of "war." Then, what is this Russian roulette meant to signify? Is war a game of Russian roulette? Is life a game of Russian roulette? Is life outside America a game of Russian roulette? And if one or all of the above are true, why does Cimino want to draw attention to this?

In a *Times* review last year, Vincent Canby made an interesting point about horse races. The gist of his argument was that in the middle of the dullest, most banal of movies, if you put a horse race up on screen, people will perk up and wonder who will win. The same could be said of Russian roulette. The sight of a man putting a gun to his head and pulling the trigger is arresting. If we know and care about the character who is forced to put the gun to his head — as we know and care about, say, the hero in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* — the image and the act may be meaningful as well. Otherwise, it is no more or less than a horse race.

The Deer Hunter is being treated with the peculiar reverence usually reserved for European masterpieces. Cimino has not been asked to chip away at his unusually long print, and advertisements speak almost piously of how it's not a film for everyone. The implication is that maybe it's too dense for the American audience. But *The Deer Hunter* isn't dense; it's timid and confusing. And, in the worst scene, it is very American as well. It is part of a macho tradition that says body is more interesting than mind. *The Deer Hunter* pulverizes the viscera and leaves the mind unchallenged.

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